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ABSTRACT

Researchers have offered a number of explanations for why people occasionally or frequently feel shy in social situations, focusing on behavioral, psychological, or somatic causes. However, each theory encompasses a problem with communication skills. A study examined the communication implications of shyness as reported in definitions by both researchers and shy people. Participants, 187 females between the ages of 14 and 58 who described themselves as shy, reported four categories of shyness symptoms: (1) behavioral; (2) cognitive; (3) somatic; and (4) miscellaneous. Results showed 18.9% of the responses in the behavioral category dealt with communication deficiencies, while other responses included withdrawing from awkward communication situations, remaining passive, avoiding interactions, and avoiding eye contact. The women also reported feeling the shyest in large and small unstructured social gatherings. Hence, their communication skills, apart from cognitive or somatic problems, were of the most concern. The findings indicate the need shy people have for interpersonal communication skills as opposed to audience-related skills, and the need for behavioral approaches to social skills in overcoming shyness. (Sixteen references are included.) (JC)

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COMMUNICATION IMPLICATIONS OF SHYNESS:

A REPORT FROM SHY PEOPLE

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COMMUNICATION IMPLICATIONS OF SHYNESS:

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Abstract

This study examined the communication implications of shyness as reported in definitions both by researchers and shy people. A diverse population of self-selected shy females show the behavioral/communication component of shyness to be the major reported symptom. Of communication skills related to shy-eliciting situations, conversation skills were of most concern. These findings indicate the need shy people have for interpersonal communication skills as opposed to audience-related skills. The study reinforces research important to educators and practitioners which indicates the need for behavioral approaches to social skills in overcoming shyness.

The Communication Implications of Shyness:

A Report from Shy People

Shyness, an inhibiting social phenomenon, is found to negatively affect 80% of our population (Zimbardo, 1977). Researchers and educators seek ways to define and lessen the difficulty of shyness, consequently shyness has been defined in various ways and illustrated in certain models. This report examines how communication is identified as an important component of shyness in both the definitions of professional researchers as well as personal expressions of shy people. Leary (1986) groups shyness definitions into three categories: a subjective experience, a behavioral perspective, and a psychological syndrome. Descriptive models of components inherent in shyness include the emotional, physiological, or somatic component, the cognitive component, and the instrumental, performance, or behavioral component.

One factor clearly emerges from each definition and model and that pervasive factor is communication. Specific definitions of shyness not only by researchers but by shy people themselves point toward a need for improved communication skills. Although communication as a factor is mentioned in each definition and component of shyness, the behavioral component seems to be of most concern to the shy person. Evidence which focuses on the three-component model and especially the behavioral definition was found by Cheek and Watson (1986). When self-selected shy people defined shyness, the behavioral component was mentioned 38.2%, the cognitive component, 24.5%, and the somatic component, 21.5%, miscellanous mentions, 15.8%.

Situations in which shyness feelings occur have been specified (Watson & Cheek, 1986), however the exact communication deficiencies in these situations that contribute to shy feelings have not been defined. Social situations in which shy people must interact may not be easily avoided, but inherent communication

deficiencies may be recognized, improved, and could alleviate many of the symptoms of shyness. This paper helps to link the importance of communication with the various definitions and models of shyness and as a result of these two reports, defines the lack of certain communication skills related to shyness-eliciting situations specified by self-selected shy people as contributing to their shyness.

Definitions of Shyness

Leary first groups definitions that describe shyness as a subjective experience. Primarily these definitions regard shyness as a form of social anxiety where one is said to "feel" shy. Buss, psychologist at the University of Texas (1980, p. 330), describes shyness in terms of one's reaction to being with strangers or casual acquaintences as "tension, concern, feelings of awkwardness and discomfort, and both gaze aversion and inhibition of normally expected social behaviors". After administering the Stanford Shyness Survey to nearly 5000 people, Zimbardo, psychologist (1977), found the middle range of people who admitted to being shy included those who felt intimidated and awkward in certain situations with certain types of people. These people felt their discomfort was strong enough to disturb their social lives and inhibit their functioning, making it hard to say what they think or do what they would like to do. He concluded that people were generally shy because they lacked social skills and had difficulty relating to people through communication.

McCroskey and Richmond, speech communicators, (1982) compare shyness to communication apprehension. They suggest that shyness and communication apprehension are similar when predicting withdrawal and reduced communicative output, but different in respect to the causes of the predicted behavior. The communication apprehension construct ties behavior to a single cause--fear or anxiety. Shyness, in comparison, suggests that the behavior may by a product of both social anxiety and low social communication skills. Consequently, shyness is the tendency to be

timid, socially reserved, and most specifically, non-talkative, while communication apprehension is the tendency to behave in a shy manner, i.e., to talk less because of fear or anxiety. The subjective definitions of shyness grouped by Leary in this category indicate that social communicative interaction is deterred by shyness.

The behavioral perspective of shyness, Leary's second category of shy definitions, describes shyness in terms of social avoidance, inhibition, and reticence. These definitions allude to the experience of "acting" shy. Accordingly, Pilkonis, psychologist, (1977, p. 596) defines shyness as "a tendency to avoid other people, to fail to respond appropriately to them and to feel nervous and anxious during interactions with them." He further describes shy behaviors as the avoidance of social interaction, inhibition, and an inability to respond in an engaging way. Specifically, he has found shy people to be reluctant to talk, to make eye contact, to gesture and to smile.

Phillips, speech educator and founder of the Reticence Program at The Pennsylvania State University, (1981, p. 3) supports the behavioral definition of shyness and asserts that shyness is nothing but symptoms and has no common cause. Consequently, he describes shyness as a set of speech incompetencies that differ for every shy person. Shyness is not a defect, but a condition resulting from a lack of specific skills. "They simply have not learned how to talk well enough with others, and they have decided it is probably not worth the effort to try."

In Leary's third category, he recognizes subjective or social anxiety as well as the behavioral definition of shyness, but objects to conceptualizing shyness as either an effective experience and an overt behavior. To this end, he suggests a third approach or category to describe shyness. He attempts to use more precise terms to reduce the ambiguity and confusion of the previous categories.

He does this by describing shyness as a psychological syndrome that includes both subjective social anxiety and inhibited social behavior. To differentiate the construct of shyness from other instances of anxious inhibition, he discusses shyness as a social phenomenon that is inherently interpersonal and is characterized by a syndrome defined in terms of social anxiety and inhibition.

A summary of Leary's three categories of definitions of shyness reveals the pervasive relationship of shyness to communication. The first category describes shyness in terms of social anxiety, i.e., fear of relating to people in a social communicative way; the second, the behavioral perspective, describes the lack of communicative behaviors in shyness, and the third, Leary's own composite, describes shyness as a syndrome which included both affective and behavioral aspects. Whether feeling shy, acting shy, or experiencing a syndrome of both social anxiety plus inhibited behavior, each experience includes the manifestation of communication. Communication then may be seen as the inherent mechanism which, in many respects, operationalizes shyness.

Models of Shyness

Further evidence to indicate that communication is an intricate part of shyness is shown in models developed to illustrate the shyness concept. The first component, the emotional, physiological, or somatic component, involves the physical discomfort such as upset stomach, pounding heart, sweating or blushing that is experienced by many, but not all shy people (e.g., McEwan & Devins, 1983; Zimbardo, 1977). The cognitive component comprises acute public self-consciousness; self-deprecating thoughts, and worries about being negatively evaluated by others. The difference between somatic and cognitive components of shyness is based on the general distinction between somatic anxiety and psychic anxiety (Buss, 1962; Schalling, 1975). The third component, the instrumental, performance, or

behavioral component, concerns the social competence of shy people. Although not all shy individuals are awkward, behaviorally inhibited, or reticent, most do think that others perceive them as lacking in social skills (e.g. Cheek & Buss, 1981; Curan, Wallander & Fischetti, 1980). When considered, the three components which comprise shyness may each contain relationships to communication. The emotional, physiological, or somatic component may result from fear and tension caused by deficient communication skills; the cognitive component may relate to thoughts and worries about communication expectations; and the behavioral, instrumental, or performance component of shyness may stem from lack of developed communication skills.

Shyness Situations

Certain situations appear to elicit shy feelings. Within these situations, communication is usually expected or necessary and this is where shy people seem to have the most difficulty. Zimbardo asked college-age students to identify the situations in which shy feelings occur (1977). These situations included large and small social gatherings, new situations, speaking with authority figures requiring assertiveness, speaking in front of an audience, evaluative situations. Using self-selected shy people of diverse ages, Watson and Cheek (1986), found responses which described similar shyness-eliciting situations. In this report we draw specific areas of communication deficiencies from the behavioral component of the three-component model of shyness (Table 1) and shyness-eliciting situations described by self-selected shy people (Table 2).

(Insert Table 1 and Table 2 about here)

Results

In response to being asked how they knew they were shy, Table 1, 187 female

subjects ranging in ages from 14 to 58 reported four categories of symptoms: behavioral, 38.2% cognitive, 24.5%; and somatic symptoms, 21.5%. One additional category was added to capture miscellaneous responses, 15.8%.

Lack of verbal skills was reported to be the most representative of communication deficiencies and comprised ninety-one responses, or 18.9% of responses of the behavioral category. Withdrawing from fearful or awkward communication situations and simply not responding or remaining passive represented 10.8% of mentions. Avoiding interactions (6.5%) was included in this category, but not considered a communication behavior. Shy subjects included overt behavior described as nonverbal communication, such as body language and eye-contact with ten mentions or 2.1% of responses to the question.

When asked in what situations subjects felt shy, Table 2, every mention related to a type of communication deficiency. Talking in social gatherings and groups of people caused the most frequent concern, with 128 mentions, or 25% of all responses to this question. The necessity of talking with a stranger or strangers in unstructured social situations followed closely in number of mentions, 123, and 24% of responses. Engaging in conversations, that is, talking with others in general, rated an almost equal number of responses, 117, or 23%, to being in social gatherings and exposed to strangers. Reporting to a group or talking to an audience represented 12% of mentions (63 times). Threatening encounters involving authoritative, assertive, or rude people was mentioned 46 times, or 9% of all responses. Twenty-six mentions were made about communicating in new situations or unfamiliar surroundings, comprising 5% of the number of responses. Miscellaneous responses accounted for the remaining 12 or 2% of the mentions.

From this data we may specify lack of certain communication skills as contributing to shyness. The need for conversation skills was apparent in 77% of

shyness-eliciting situations; public speaking skills, 12%; and assertiveness skills, 9%. The skill of talking "when in social gatherings," i.e., introducing oneself, beginning, maintaining, and ending a conversation, ability to relate anecdotes and appropriate stories and engage in group discussion appeared to be the largest concern of shy people. Getting acquainted with a new person which can be accomplished through introductions, questions, and self-disclosure was mentioned also as a major concern. In summary, conversation skills in general whether in gatherings, with strangers, or in new situations, seemed to be the main communication need of the shy person.

Discussion

The findings of this study support four important conclusions linking communication to the difficulties of shyness. First, although the subjective, behavioral, and psychological definitions of shyness each include communication as a factor, the behavioral component of shyness appears to be the most often mentioned symptom. This finding is in agreement with other shy-person reports (Zimbardo, 1977). However, this study adds another dimension. Since subjects in this study were of a diverse age group, we may now have evidence that the behavioral/communication difficulties of shyness are not only indiginous to the post-adolescent population, but may continue into a later age.

A second finding of the study is the prevalence of conversation skills relatec to shyness-eliciting situations over the need for other verbal skills. This assumption, too, is advanced in other studies (Pilkonis, 1977; Cheek & Buss, 1981). Since the need for conversation skills is shown in an overwhelming percent of situations (77%), if the shy person's major concern is a result of the behavioral perspective, this skill may be the key to overcoming shyness for many shy people.

Third, the indication of need for conversation skills over other types of communication skills, specifies the need for interpersonal communication skills

as opposed to audience or public speaking skills. Interestingly enough, speaking in front of an audience, reported to be the major fear of many Americans (Wallenchinsky, D., Wallace, I., & Wallace, A., 1978), represented only 12% of shyness responses as compared with combined conversation and assertiveness responses, or 86% of all mentions indicating interpersonal communication. This finding also supports the distinction between shyness and communication apprehension. As McCroskey and Richmond (1982) explain, "shyness is the genus. . . communication apprehension the specie--the tendency to behave in a shy manner because of fear or anxiety." p. 3. Pilkonis (1977), too, found shyness to be less relevant in the structured atmosphere of preparing and delivering the speech than in the unstructured interpersonal encounter.

Last, for educators and practitioners, this study indicates the need shy people show for instruction in the development of interpersonal communication skills, primarily conversation, in an effort to overcome shyness. As other studies indicate (Alden & Cappe, 1986; Glass & Shea, 1986), much of the clinically relevant research to overcoming shyness has focused on behavioral and cognitive behavioral approaches to teaching social skills. The need for the development of conversation skills fits into this shyness alleviation trend.

We have examined the communication implication of shyness as reported in definitions both by researchers and shy people. A diverse population of self-selected shy females show the behavioral/communication component to be the major reported symptom. Of communication skills related to shy-eliciting situations, conversation skills were of most concern. These findings indicate the need shy people have for interpersonal communication skills as opposed to audience-related skills. The study reinforces research for educators and practitioners which indicates the need fro behavioral approaches to social skills in overcoming shyness.

The study opens some interesting areas for future research. Two areas may

be pursued. First, Pilkonis (1977), using a college-age population, found differences in shy and not-shy men to be consistently greater and shy females to be less shy than shy males. Since the present study dealt with a diverse age population, are diverse age males equally as shy as females of a diverse age? Second, since situations concerning shyness were described by shy females as predominently ones which required conversation, this finding may reflect a sex-specific situation stemming from women's life experiences. One could wonder if coming from a male oriented society, do female subjects have fewer experiences with public speaking and are they, therefore, unable to recognize shyness symptoms in that arena?

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Table 1

Three-component Model of Shyness

Components	Mentions	
	n	%
Behavioral	184	38.2
Cognitive	118	24.5
Somatic	103	21.5
Miscellaneous	76	15.8

Symptoms	Mentions	
	n	%
Lack of verbal skills	91	18.9
Overt behavior--withdrawal (lack of behavior)	52	10.8
Avoidance	31	6.4
Overt behavior--non-verbal (body language, eye contact)	10	2.1

Note. From "The Definition of Shyness: Psychological Imperialism or Construct Validity?" by J. M. Cheek and A. K. Watson, (in press), Journal of Social Behavior and Personality.

Table 2

Shyness-Eliciting Situations

Situations	Mentions n	Mentions %	Related Communication Skills
Being in social gatherings	128	25	Conversation
Exposure to strangers	123	24	Conversation
Engaging in conversation	117	23	Conversation
Speaking to an audience	63	12	Public speaking
Talking to authority figures or opposite sex	46	9	Assertiveness
Entering new situations	26	5	Conversation
Miscellaneous	12	2	

Note. From "Shyness Situations: Perspectives of a Diverse Sample of Shy Females" by A.K. Watson and J. M. Cheek, 1986, Psychological Reports, 59, 1040-1042.